DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 273 414 RC 015 892

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TITLE The Social Structure of American Agriculture.
PUB DATE Aug 86
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Rural Sociological Society (Salt Lake City, UT, August 26-30, 1986).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Agribusiness; Agricultural Production; *Agriculture; *Farmers; Farm Labor; Farm Management; *Models; *Rural Farm Residents; Rural Population; Sharecroppers; Social Class; *Social Stratification; Social Structure; Social Theories

ABSTRACT

Social stratification in agriculture is a complicated process without a theoretical paradigm. Research to date has typically focused on the stratification of farms rather than the social stratification of farmers. Therefore, identifying social classes in agriculture based on a typology of farms clearly misses the social relations segment of stratification. A continuum based on ownership, labor contribution, and control over the production process is suggested as a possible stratification system for agriculture to better answer questions of benefit and control as well as ownership and wages. This system includes three general categories (agribusiness, farmer, and farmworkers) along with degrees of stratification to include owner capitalist, owner operator, manager, cash renter, crop share renter, share cropper, contract producer, hired labor, and unpaid workers. (NEC)

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THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF AMERICAN AGRICULTURE

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Presented at the Rural Sociological Society meeting
Salt Lake City, Utah
1986.

RC015892

SOCIAL STRATIFICATION IN AGRICULTURE

Measuring Inequality

Inequality is often measured using one of three methods; participant observation, reputational survey, or statistical index. These measurement methods cause particular problems for analysis of social stratification in agriculture. The Marxist class divisions of owners controlling both the property and means of production verses wage labor become muddy in what Erik Olin Wright (1980) called the contradictory classes. In this catagory owner and worker roles are held by the same individual or household production unit. A good deal of traditional family farm production falls into this contradictory class.

Participant observation to determine social class in agriculture is substantially different than participant observation of class in say a community. It is difficult to notice a hierarchy since farmers typically do not act as a cohesive group. Participant observation studies in agriculture usually focus on leadership within a specific farm organization or the power structure within a rural community.

Using reputational measures the participants indicate the position of individuals within a group. Cross checking then indicates a ranking of positions but would not necessarily indicate class. Reputation measures of class have been used to determine occupational class rankings. However, the method does not combine characteristics which would identify catagories within agriculture.

Various indexes have been used to measure class objectively. The most frequently used index is the Socioeconomic Index developed by Duncan. Unfortunately it does not accurately reflect the social status for agriculture. In estimating the NORC prestige rating from the SEI, `farmer` was the category which had the least effective estimate of prestige with an error of -41 (Duncan, 1961).

Comparing agriculture to other occupational catagories is difficult because agriculture is not a unilateral situation. Within agriculture a number of social classes can be identified including owner and worker as well as combined classes of owner/worker and unpaid labor.

The total number of farms have steadily decreased in the last few years. For example, in Louisiana between 1964 and 1982 the number of farms changed from 62,466 to 31,638 a decline of 50.6% (Fieldler, 1985). The change in the number of farms dramatically affects the absolute number of owners possible. How this change effects the social structure as a stratified system is debated. The decline in number of farms can indicate a movement toward the industrialization of agriculture. However, it is just as likely that within the limited number of farms the proportion of producers in the stratification catagories has not significantly been changed. Questions of the prolitarianization of the American farmer are still unclear. Are there fewer farm wage workers today than when threashing crews and custom combining were the norm? Is the role of the sharecropper one of greater autonomy or less? Distinct classes of agriculture are

difficult to determine.

Table 1. here

For example, the number of part-time farmers is another major shift in American agriculture today. Before World War II only 6% of all farm operators worked off the farm but by 1974 30% had off farm incomes. A shift in farm ownership was also seen. In 1964 60% of all farms were operated by full owners, with the rest evenly divided by part owners and tenants. The percentage of tenant farmers declined steadily so that by 1982 only 12% of Louisiana farms were operated by tenants. The percentage of part owners rose to a high of nearly 1/3rd of all Louisiana farms in 1978 with slight declines in 1982. Farms with full owners have varied from a low of 55% in 1978 to a high of 60% in 1964 (Fielder and Bergen, 1985).

Ownership of farmland however does not always equate with a farming occupation. For the United States as a whole only 66.9% of full-owner considered their primary occupation farming. Part-time owners were more likely to be farmers with 81.8% of their occupations to be listed as farmers. Some tenants also considered farming to be a secondary occupation with only 76% listing farming as a primary occupation. Farming was less likely to be the principle occupation of farmers in the south, 53% as compared with 62.2% of all U.S. farmers. Black farmers however, were more likely to be full time farmers, 62% as compared with 53% of all farm operators in the South where nearly all Black farmers live (Carlin,1979).

Although the percent of all farms which are full-owner operated has remained fairly constant the percentage of acres in the category has declined substantially. A larger percentage of the acreage is now operated by part-owners. Finally, although there has been a decline in the percentage of farms with hired managers and tenant operators the decline in the percentage of land in that category is considerably less.

Table 2. here

Determining income as a measure of social inequality for farmers is a difficult task since traditionally farmers' income has been under reported. The assumption of under reporting income has become institutionalized in government policy. An example is the lower welfare benefits available to persons living on farms based on the assumption that farm families supplement their incomes through gardens and small livestock. Increased specialization of farming and the necessity for many farm families to be supported by dual incomes has made this assumption questionable. Very few farming families are able to consume the products they grow (Berry, 1978). In addition, direct income from farming has not kept pace with inflation. One estimate of

income showed a 17% decline in real income for farmers between 1946 and 1960 (Heady, 1965).

The south has consistently been the region of the greatest poverty. In 1970 it was the only region where the majority (51%) of white poor in rural non-farm residences worked over 40 hours a week and still earned below the poverty level (Flynt, 1979).

The traditional farmer in America is in a class position which Marx would label petty bourgeois; one in which he is owner and also contributes most of the labor with the family as the economic unit. The attraction for farming for many people is that the farmer makes the production decisions, takes the risk, does the work, and receives any resulting profit. However, unlike most businesses where the risks can be calculated, with farming there is a large measure of uncertainty and the odds of natural catastrophes are unknown. This role of decision making is one of the key factors in determining social classes in agriculture.

Social Classes in Agriculture

Proposals for a social structure of agriculture are numerous. Oscar Larson, et al. (1983) attempted to identify social class for farmers using standard lower, working, middle, and upper class catagories. Their findings show that agricultural status factors (agricultural wealth and income) were more influential than general status factors (education, number of hired workers, total family income and net worth) in determining class position for farmers. Thus, farmers as a total group do not fit within one class position.

Patrick H. Mooney (1983) in his article "Toward a Class Analysis of Midwestern Agriculture" developed a model which he uses to identify four ideal types of farmers; economist's farmer, successful family farmer, marginal family farmer and poor farmer. Mooney's theoretical model of class structure in midwestern agriculture is based on the neo-Marxist framework developed by Eric Wright and indicates a confusion of both pure class locations and contradictory situation for agriculture. He attempts to incorporate a Weberian notion of "formal rationality" to deal with the social relations of agriculture.

Figure 1. here

Susan Mann and James Dickinson (1985), in their unpublished paper "One Furrow Forward, Two Furrows Back: A Marx-Weber Synthesis for Rural Sociology", point out a number of weaknesses in the Monney model. Mann and Dickinson feel that Marx and Weber have fundamental differences that prohibit a synthesis of their theories and suggest integrating a life cycle approach with Marxism as a more accurate method to understanding class dynamics in agriculture.

Mooney's typology is similar to that of Rodefeld (1978). Rodefeld's typology is based on the level of land ownership and labor provision by farm size and farm manager. Although this

typology clasifies farm types it does little to explain social stratification of farmers.

Figure 2. here

Although all these models attempt to determine a stratification system for agriculture, they are based primarily on a factor of size measured by income or acreage. A system for social stratification in agriculture could be determined better by the answers to questions of benefit and control as well as ownership and wages. Who decides what happens during the production process? Who takes the risk of the market and nature? Who benefits from the production profits? Based on answers to questions like these, three general catagories of producers emerge; the capitalist agribusiness producers, the farmer, and the farmworker. Within each of these general divisions there are levels of control and ownership which relate to a continuum agricultural stratification.

The capitalist agribusiness separates ownership and control over the production process and wage labor. The corporate farm produces food similar to industrial production with similar social relations within the capitalist framework. This general catagory includes the owner who controls the means of production including land and equipment as well as the manager who controls wage labor but is responsible to land holder(s) for the means of production. The owner/manager role can be combined but the key factor is the non-worker control of production process and use of wage labor.

The traditional farmer is in that contradictory class position where ownership, control, and labor elements are combined within the individual or household production unit. In the current farm economy, however, this role has expanded to include the part-owner who uses self labor, the tenant/manager in a sharecropping or cash rent situation, and the contract producer who is part of a vertically integrated industry. For these farmers either control of the production process is held by others or they are both workers and hire workers.

The third catagory is that of farmworker. Farmworkers include paid wage labor; seasonal, migratory, or fulltime hired farmhands. In addition, unpaid farm labor, typically incorporated in the household, are considered farmworkers.

Differentiated by measures of ownership, income, and control over the production process six social classes in American Agriculture can be identified within the three main stratification catagores.

I. Agribusiness
    1. owner capitalist/agribusiness producer
II. Farmer
    2. owner/part owner operator
    3. tenant
        a. cash renter
        b. crop share renter

c. sharecropper
4. contract producer

III. Farm worker
5. hired labor
6. unpaid labor

Owner capitalist/agribusiness producer

Although relatively small in numbers the impact of corporate farms is large. The cost of starting an average farm was estimated to be a quarter of a million dollars in 1975 (Rodefeld, 1978). That kind of investment requires more than most individuals are able to accumulate. In addition, the capital gain return from farming in the 1970's was over 11% while comparable stock return was less than 1% (Schertz,1979). As a result by 1978 there were 52,514 farms operated by corporations (USDA, 1984). Of these, less than 2,000 had more than 10 shareholders.

The percentage of agricultural production under contract or vertical organization by corporations has been steadily increasing however. In 1960, 19% of production was under contract, in 1970 it had risen to 22% and by 1980 almost one-third of agricultural production was controlled by corporations under contract or in vertical production (USDA, 1984).

Over one-fifth of all farming corporations in the mid 1970's were located in California, Florida, and Texas. These corporations were involved primarily in feeding cattle, producing fruits and vegetables, growing nursery and greenhouse plants and producing sugarcane (Schertz,1979). California has the largest percentage of corporate farms. In 1968, corporate farms in California included 83% of all farms, 60% of the lettuce acreage, 34% of the cotton, 27% of citrus acres and 41% of fed cattle (Ball and Heady, 1972).

Owner/part-owner and operator

The family farm has been called the backbone of American agriculture. This is the ideal category in which the farmer fits the definition of the petty bourgeois; owning the means of production (or at least some of the land and equipment), taking the decision making risks (as opposed to the producer under direct contract to a corporation which provides all inputs and the farmer only his labor) and serving as the worker.

The tradition of the family farm is based on historical governmental policy making small acreages available, an abundance of land lowering the price, high wages during the settlement period allowing capital accumulation, high values for ownership, and the fact that for many years the incentives for owning land and not farming it were low (Rodefeld, 1978). In 1949, 95% of all farms were family farms (Ball and Heady, 1972). Yet since then a major decline in the number of family farms has occurred. Farming for many is now a part-time or part-owner situation.

Tenant

Farmers without ownership in land would be classified as workers in a Marxian class system. Statification in agriculture

however classifies tenants based on decision making level. Cash rent tenants have the most control over production. A flat cash payment is made up front and the tenant farmer makes all production decisions, takes the production risks, and retains any profits. Crop share rent allows a tenant farmer to use land paying the owner on a share of the crop or its value at the end of the year. In this arrangement the tenant supplies all inputs and machinery, the owner provides the land. Decisions regarding production and risks of crop failure are primarily shared. Sharecropping tenants typically contribute only their labor to the farm operation. These tenants differ from hired labor in the risk they take on the farm operation. Unlike crop share renters they have little control or imput into the production process (Wells, 1984) Their income is determined by a fixed share of the crop rather than a salary or fixed wage.

Farm tenancy is affected by land speculation, plantation pattern of agriculture, mechanization, credit availability, prices, costs and taxes, and the unavailability of good land (Maris, 1940). In 1930, 55.5% of southern farms were operated by tenants (Flynt, 1979). This was a considerable increase from 1920 when 49.6% of southern farmers were tenants and in 1880 when only 36.2% were tenants (Johnson, 1935). As technology changed and tenants were no longer needed for cotton production the tenant family faced four alternative: starvation, government relief, new work in cities, or a reorganization of farming. Charles Johnson in his book, THE COLLAPSE OF COTTON TENANCY recommends the reorganization of farming as the only possible solution. Tenancy at that time demanded complete dependence. Education and initiative were not necessary and the landless continued to remain landless and without alternative skills (Johnson, 1935). Thus, characteristics of a region and it's historical development contribute to the stratification in agriculture particularily in the tenant catagory.

Hired labor

The farmworker has been part of American agriculture throughout its history. In 1910 13.6 million people were hired farmworkers. By 1981 the number of farmworkers had declined to only 2.4 million. One third of these, or 115,000, are considered migrant workers traveling over 500 miles to get to their jobs (USDA, 1984). This number of migrant workers is less than one-third the estimated number in the 1950's (Fite, 1981).

The demand for hired farm labor declined 47% between 1910 and 1960 (Heady, 1965). This decline is the result of farm wages and the price of products making it difficult for farm owners to hire workers as well as the short run advantages of replacing labor with capital investments. Advances in technology allow for continued replacement of machines for men. As recently as the 1960's and 1970's mechanization reduced the labor costs for producing tobacco, fruits, and vegetables. By 1963, 72% of the cotton produced in the US was machine picked (Fite, 1981).

Farmworkers have one of the lowest socioeconomic statuses in our country. Many things most workers take for granted farmworkers today are organizing to get(Baker, 1976). In a recent

Congressional hearing a farmworker said, "we are cursed as revolutionaries when we demand better wages and working conditions or ask for health insurance and unemployment insurance" (Leon, 1978).

One of the changes resulting from farmworkers organizing is a shift by agribusiness to a sharecrop arrangement rather than using hired labor. This allows the corporation to maintain control over the production process while avoiding legal responsibility for labor arrangements (Wells, 1984).

Unpaid Labor

While the number of both family and hired workers has declined since the 1930's, family labor has declined more rapidly than the other group in both absolute and relative terms. Family workers in 1977, however, still outnumbered hired workers by a ratio of 2 to 1 (Schertz,1979).

Unpaid labor is in particular a case of gender inequality. Women as farmers are usually considered workers rather than farmers. Women supply labor whenever there is a labor shortage and are typically essential to the viability of subsistence farms. Although women tend to supply labor when there is a shortage it is overlooked and undervalued. Because of the patriarchal division of labor, men rarely perform women's work and they control their own realm through the exclusion of women. When a woman takes over in the field there is no lessening of her domestic workload and as a result, some women are dissatisfied with farming because of overwork, isolation, devaluation of their contribution, poverty and male dominance (Sachs, 1983).

The contribution of children and extended family members is relativly undocumented but preliminary studies indicate that their contribution may be substantial (Deseran, et al., 1984 and Broussard and Heagler, 1986).

Conclusion

Social stratification in agriculture is a complicated process without a theoretical paradigm. Research to date has typically focused on the stratification of farms rather than the social stratification of farmers. As was pointed out twenty-five years ago by Arther Stitchcombe (1961) farming organization can incorporate a number of stratification systems. Therefore, identifying social classes in agriculture based on a typology of farms clearly misses the social relations segment of stratification.

A continuum based on ownership, labor contribution, and control over the production process is suggested here as a possible stratification system for agriculture. This system includes three general catagories (agribusiness, farmer, and farmworker) along with degrees of stratification to include owner capitalist, owner operator, manager, cash renter, crop share renter, share cropper, contract producer, hired labor, and unpaid workers. This general outline provides an overall classification which can be applied to producers in a social stratification system rather than the usual stratification of agriculture based on farm characteristics.

Table 1. DECLINE IN FARM NUMBERS

Year	Total Number of Farms
1950	5,648,000
1960	3,955,000
1970	2,944,000
1980	2,400,000

(Schertz,1980 and USDA,1984)

Table 2. PORTION OF LAND OPERATED OWNED BY FARM MANAGER

Year	Full-owner operated		Part-owner operated		Hired manager-tenant operated	
	% farms	% acres	% farms	% acres	% farms	% acres
1910	52.7	52.9	9.3	15.2	37.9	31.9
1935	47.1	37.1	10.1	25.2	42.8	37.7
1950	57.4	36.2	15.3	36.5	27.2	27.4
1954	57.4	34.2	18.2	41.7	24.4	25.0
1959	57.1	30.9	22.5	44.9	20.4	24.1
1964	57.6	28.7	24.8	48.0	17.6	23.3

(Rodefeld,1978)

positive market position

economist's farmer

successful family farmer

formal rationality

substantive rationality

poor farmer

marginal family farmer

negative market position

Figure 1.

high land ownership and management

family type

larger than family type

high labor by manager

low labor by manager

tenant type

industrial type

low land ownership by management

Figure 2.

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